

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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FOR EA/ANP

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SENV EAID PFOR (NEW HEBRIDES)

SUBJ: POLLUTION THREAT FROM S.S. PRESIDENT COOLIDGE

1. THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED FROM THE BRITISH
RESIDENT COMMISSIONER REGARDING THE WRECKAGE OF THE S.S.
PRESIDENT COOLIDGE. COPY OF LETTER AND ACCOMPANYING PHOTO-
GRAPHS ARE BEING SENT UNDER SEPARATE AIR MAIL COVER. RECEIPT
OF LETTER WAS ACKNOWLEDGED-

QUOTE I SHOULD LIKE TO BRING TO YOUR ATTENTION THE INCREASING
THREAT OF OIL POLLUTION TO THE WATERS AND SHORES OF THE NEW
HEBRIDES THAT HAS BEEN CREATED BY THE 900 TONS OF FUEL OIL
THAT REMAIN IN THE FAST CORRODING WRECK OF THE S.S. "PRESIDENT
COLLIDGE".

IN DECEMBER 1942 THIS AMERICAN LINER CONVERTED FOR USE AS A
TROOP SHIP WAS BASED IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC. RETURNING TO SANTO
HARBOR ON ESPIRITU SANTO ISLAND WITH 4,000 TROUPS ON BOARD,
SHE WAS HOLED BY MINES AND SANK RAPIDLY AFTER THE CAPTAIN HAD
RUN HER ONTO THE REEF IN A SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO SAVE HIS MEN.

THE JOINT ADMINISTRATION ARE GREATLY CONCERNED BY THE POLLUTION
THREAT REPRESENTED BY THIS WRECK WHICH IS CONTINUALLY LEAKING
THIN STREAMS OF OIL. LAS YEAR A PARTNERSHIP UNDERTOOK TO CARRY
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OUT A FEASIBILITY STUDY ON THE WRECK IN ORDER TO ASCERTAIN HOW

MUCH OIL THERE WAS ON BOARD, ITS DISTRIBUTION THROUGHOUT THE SHIP, AND THE POSSIBLE METHODS THAT MIGHT BE EMPLOYED TO REMOVE IT. THIS PARTNERSHIP HAS NOW PRESENTED ITS REPORT TO THE JOINT ADMINISTRATION.

ORIGINALLY, IT HAD BEEN ESTIMATED THAT THERE COULD HAVE BEEN ANYTHING TO TO 4,000 TONS OF OIL STILL ON BOARD THE SHIP, IN WHICH CASE IT WAS ENVISAGED THAT THE SALE OF THIS OIL WOULD COVER THE ENTIRE COST OF THE STUDY AND OF THE OPERATION TO REMOVE IT. HOWEVER, ONLY 900 TONS WERE FOUND TO BE REMAINING IN THE SHIP AND WERE SEEN TO BE WIDELY DISTRIBUTED IN A RANDOM MANNER IN TANKS THROUGHOUT THE SHIP.

THE INSPECTION OF THE HULL CARRIED OUT BY DIVERS REVEALED THAT IT IS IN VERY POOR CONDITION WITH SEVERAL SMALL OIL LEAKS COMING FROM ROTTEN RIVETS AND PLATES. THE FRAGILE CONDITION OF THE WRECK AND THE FACT THAT SANTO IS AN AREA VERY PRONE TO EARTHQUAKES SUGGEST THAT THERE IS A REAL IMMINENT DANGER THAT THE OIL LEAKS COULD INCREASE TO PRODUCE MAJOR OIL POLLUTION. THE DIVING TEAM WAS AT THE WRECK WHEN AN EARTH QUAKE OCCURRED ON 20 NOVEMBER 2974. FOLLOWING THIS, THE PLATING SPLIT AT THE TURN OF THE BILGE AND A STEADY STREAM OF OIL COMMENCED LEAKING FROM IT. THIS LEAK COULD BE FED FROM ANY OF A COMBINATION OF 4 TANKS IN AN AREA CONTAINING APPROXIMATELY 200 TONS OF OIL. THE DIVING TEAM FAILED TO SEAL THIS LEAK WHICH REQUIRED A GREAT DEAL OF PATCHING IN AN AREA ALREADY WEAKENED BY CORROSION. THEY REPORTED THREE OTHER MAJOR OIL LEAKS.

ANOTHER FACTOR ADDING TO THE URGENCY OF THIS MATTER IS THE UNUSUALLY HIGH RATE OF CORROSION ON THE WRECK. THREADED TAPERED STEEL PINS FITTED TO THE TEST HOLES MADE BY THE DIVER HAD LOST THEIR THREADS DUE TO CORROSION AFTER 5 TO 6 WEEKS EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE CAPPED WITH NUTS. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT THEY WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO REMOVE AT ALL AFTER 4 TO 6 MONTHS, WHICH WOULD THEREFORE NECESSITATE THE RE-DRILLING OF THE TANKS AND THE LOSS OF MUCH OF THE WORK ALREADY ACHIEVED.

THE EARLIEST DATE OPERATION COULD COMMENCE ON REMOVING THE OIL WOULD BE MARCH OF THIS YEAR. MR. J. YOUNG OF MARINE PACIFIC ESTIMATED THE TOTAL COST OF THE OPERATION AT NEARLY AUSTRALIAN UNCLASSIFIED

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DOLS 95,000. THIS ESTIMATE WAS CALCULATED ON A TIME FACTOR OF 20 WEEKS FOR THE ENTIRE OPERATION.

THE CONDOMINIUM GOVERNMENT HAS ONLY VERY LIMITED FUNDS FOR DEVELOPMENT. THE FIGURE OF AUSTRALIAN DOLS 95,000 REPRESENTS A MAJOR PORTION OF THE FUNDS WHICH COULD OTHERWISE BE SPENT ON OTHER VITAL VELOPMENT PROJECTS. WE FEEL THAT IT IS, NEVER-THELESS, A MATTER OF TOP PRIORITY THAT THIS POLLUTION THREAT

SHOULD BE REMOVED. IF ANOTHER EARTHQUAKE WERE TO RELEASE
LARGE QUANTITIES OF OIL IT COULD DO IRREPARABLE LONG-TERM
DAMAGE TO THE BEAUTIFUL COASTS OF THESE ISLANDS.

I AM AWARE THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES IS MOST
CONCERNED WITH THE PROBLEM OF POLLUTION IN ALL ITS FORMS.
THE NEW HEBRIDES IS FORTUNATE IN THIS RESPECT AND AT THE PRESENT
TIME THE ONLY REAL POLLUTION THREAT FACING THE TERRITORY IS
THE WRECK OF THE "PRESIDENT COOLIDGE".

I SHOULD BE VERY GRATEFUL TO LEARN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE IF
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES WOULD BE ABLE TO OFFER THE
NEW HEBRIDES ANY ASSISTANCE WITH THE PROJECT FOR THE REMOVAL
OF THE OIL FROM THE WRECK. MY COLLEAGUE THE FRENCH RESIDENT
COMMISSIONER ALSO SUPPORTS THIS REQUEST.

SIGNED BRITISH RESIDENT COMMISSIONER. UNQUOTE.
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